Jet Age Man

The latest reading material for B-47 fans is a book by one of our members, Earl McGill. *Jet Age Man* is subtitled “SAC B-47 and B-52 Operations in the Early Cold War.” The book is to be available in September and Earl is planning on being at the Tucson Reunion. Go ahead and get your copy and bring it along so he can sign it for you. The paragraph below is taken from pre-release material. Price is $36.46 from Amazon (at least today it is).

..[JAM] takes place in the Cold War trenches of the Strategic Air Command. It is about those who served and the many who died, told by someone who, as a young man, literally held the fate of all mankind within reach of a switch. More particularly, this is a story of man’s interaction with two bombers that changed the course of political history, and were perhaps the most influential aircraft in the annals of aircraft development.

The author piloted and instructed in both the B-47 and the B-52, starting out as a copilot in the B-47, then aircraft commander and finally, instructor pilot in both aircraft. *Jet Age Man* chronicles his fifteen-year relationship with the B-47 and the aircraft the B-47 became, the B-52 - a bomber still in service today. Earl McGill sent this shot of 53-2104 taking off from Davis-Monthan on its way to Pueblo CO for display in the air museum there. As noted in the last issue it was the last Stratojet to fly out of the boneyard. *Jet Age Man*

Jet Age Man

SAC B-47 and B-52 Operations in the Early Cold War

Earl J. McGill

Lt. Col. USAF (ret.)
Foreword by Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Jr., Major General, USAF (ret.)

When Mac McGill asked me to do a Foreword for his book *Jet Age Man* I told him that since his book was about bombers and because I considered myself the quintessential tactical fighter pilot, he should look for someone better qualified. After a few second thoughts, I decided to accept the kind offer because I was also a Cold War warrior and, in addition, had some comments concerning General Curtis Lemay and SAC that might be of interest to his readers.

After World War II my father secured quarters on Bolling Field and as high school senior we often shot skeet on the base range where, on Sunday, General Lemay was invariably present. Dad introduced me to this excellent skeet shooter who I thought somewhat taciturn. Little did I know that I was destined to see and speak with Lemay many times later in my own Air Force Career.

In 1952, as I left Hondo Air Base in Texas for jet fighter training at Williams AFB in Arizona, my father asked me why I had not pushed for assignment to multi-engine training. I replied that I wanted to experience the thrill of flying a gun platform alone and at high speeds. I punctuated my reply by saying I did not want to muscle a huge truck around the sky. My father, who was Chief of Staff of the Air Force at the time, replied with that sage grin I was so familiar with, ‘Well son, you may be making a mistake because I have just written Curt Lemay, at SAC, a blank check!’ I’ll never forget that conversation because I was to experience, for the next 20 years, exactly what that blank check meant to the Air Force and to the country.

Months later, at Mitchell AFB I accompanied my father-in-law to Base Operations to meet incoming General Lemay who stepped down from his plushed-up KC-97 and said to me, ‘Hello Sandy, What are you doing these days?’ I offered him my hand and proudly said, ‘I’m on my way to Germany to fly the F-86.’ Without change of expression he looked at me and replied, ‘Well, I guess we all have to have our fling!’

On May 8, 1954 a SAC RB-47 was tasked to overfly parts of the Soviet Union to determine if MiG 17s were deployed to the particular area. Over the assigned area, MiG 17s made a couple of firing passes and one got a lucky hit on the RB-47. The aircraft returned safely to base and during the flight de-briefing, General Lemay asked Hal Austin the pilot, ‘Why were you not shot down?’ Austin said he thought the Russians could have shot them down had they pressed their attacks. At that point Lemay said he was convinced that most fighter pilots were basically cowards anyway. As you can imagine, that kind of talk from the man who got the blank check only added to the animus most fighter types felt for SAC in general, and Lemay in particular.

There is no doubt that SAC was our only hedge against the Soviet Union during the early days of the Cold War. Their dedication, training and professionalism was attained and maintained with the major share of the Air Force budget.

My father selected Lemay to correct the sick situation in SAC that was left by Generals George Kenny and Clements McMullen, and his leadership was crucial. We in the tactical business were, for a period of time, on the second team. We fought to keep our proficiency in austere budget circumstances and by the results we posted in the ‘hot’ wars of Korea and Vietnam it can be said we produced miracles with very little.

In spite of my classmates who went to SAC and waved their spot promotions in my face, I never once waivered in my devotion to the fighter game. Read Mac McGill’s fine book and discover what aircrew dedication in SAC was able to accomplish. Without a doubt, they kept the Cold War cold, and I salute them all!

Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Jr.
Major General, USAF Ret.
Preface

Several years ago my grandson asked, ‘How many wars did you fight in, Grandpa?’ I told him, ‘Two,’ before I stopped to think. ‘No, make that three: Korea, Vietnam and the Cold War. ‘Did we win?’ This time I thought before I answered. ‘You could say that we lost one, tied another, and won the third.’

The events in this book took place during the war we won, the Cold War—events that forever changed and shaped the world we live in. Historically, the Cold War will probably go down as a period when civilization teetered on the edge of the abyss, an exercise we called brinkmanship. And that is what it was. One slip and history would have come to an abrupt and final end. Yet, there was a platform, an underpinning that kept mankind afloat. To some it appeared as utter madness, and was in fact commonly referred to as M.A.D.

The concept of Mutually Assured Destruction provoked the ‘sane’ world to organize protests and march on capitals. It inspired serious films such as *On the Beach* and the satire, *Dr. Strangelove*. To argue in favor of the concept invited being branded a maniac, or worse.

The architect of MAD, General Curtis LeMay, became a symbol of madness himself. In *Thirteen Days*, a 2000 film about the Cuban Missile Crisis, the character of Curtis LeMay is depicted as closer to mad man than rational human being. No wonder. Raised during those turbulent times, most contemporary historians tend to view the concept in negative terms, concluding that we were damned lucky to have survived. In a way, they are correct, but like a good poker player, for LeMay and the thousands of Cold War warriors who fought and won while serving in the Strategic Air Command, the proof of concept lies not in the ‘what if?’ but in the reality, ‘what did.’

Historically, M.A.D. succeeded where appeasement, diplomacy and even hot wars failed. When the wall came down, strength, not weakness had prevailed. Strength became the byword for a new generation of mostly conservative banner wavers, many of whom were children whose experiences in the Cold War were limited to being forced to crouch under school desks as protection against ‘the bomb.’ They were people who never served on the front lines of the Cold War.

Most of this story takes place in the Cold War trenches, particularly in the Strategic Air Command. It is about the men who served there and many who died there. More importantly, it is told by someone who, in old age, is required to take off his shoes at the airport security gate, and, as a young man, literally held the fate of all mankind within reach of a single switch. More particularly, this is a story of one man’s interaction with two bombers that changed the course of political history and were perhaps the most influential aircraft in the annals of aircraft development.

I was fortunate to have flown both the B-47 and the B-52, starting out as a copilot in the B-47, then aircraft commander and finally, instructor pilot in both aircraft. This book chronicles my fifteen-year relationship with the B-47 and the aircraft the B-47 became, the B-52, a bomber still in service today.